The Original Meaning of the Parable of the Good Shepherd

by Thomas Earl Franklin

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Thomas E. Franklin

1343 Richmond Drive N.E.

Albuquerque, New Mexico 87106

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John 11:51, 52: The Meaning of the Parable of the Good Shepherd to the First Readers.

I read an explanation of the Parable of the Good Shepherd in a magazine in the 1980's. The article was so bad that I resolved to figure out for myself what Jesus himself had meant. I don't think I had the parable figured out to my satisfaction till about 1990. It shouldn't have taken so long.

The other sheep in John 10 are the dispersed Jews or Israelites, not the gentiles. John chapter 11 explains the parable soon after it was told in John 10.

John 11:51-52[1] is the key to explain the parable. John 11:47-53 includes those two verses and reads:

> The chief priests therefore and the Pharisees gathered a council, and said, What do we? for this man doeth many signs. If we let him thus alone, all men will believe on him: and the Romans will come and take away both our place and our nation. But a certain one of them, Caiaphas, being high priest that year, said unto them, Ye know nothing at all, nor do ye take account that it is expedient for you that one man should die for the people, and that the whole nation perish not. Now this he said not of himself: but being high priest that year, he prophesied that Jesus should die for the nation; and not for the nation only, but that he might also gather together into one the children of God that are scattered abroad. So from that day forth they took counsel that they might put him to death.

The first three verses above report a conversation. Verses 51-52, which I underlined, was an unexpected interpretation of the conversation by the evangelist, inspired by Holy Spirit, containing references to the Parable of the Good Shepherd. The Bible often gives interpretations. For example in John 2:19 (ASV), Jesus said, "Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up." The Jews answered in verse 20, "Forty and six years was this temple in building, and wilt thou raise it up in three days?" But verse 21 explains: "But he spake of the temple of his body." The explanatory comment was added by the evangelist, and the reader was expected to believe his interpretation. Likewise, the reader should accept the interpretation of

1 Most of the quotations in this booklet are from the American Standard Version (ASV).

the parable that is implicit in John 11:51-52. It is astounding to me that people don't pay attention to it.

God inspired Caiaphas's choice of words so that it had a double meaning. He and the council were unaware of the second, prophetic meaning, so "they took counsel that they might put him to death." Caiaphas convinced the council that Jesus had to be killed; otherwise the Romans would consider Jesus to be a rival king with many followers who would try to drive the Romans out of Judaea. And then Roman armies would be sent to destroy the temple and kill or exile all the Jewish nation. So murdering Jesus would save the nation of Judaea from destruction by the Romans. But the prophetic meaning of his words was that it was better for Jesus to die a sacrificial death that would result in the everlasting salvation of thousands of Jews than for all Jews to die in their sins. So the death of Jesus would lead to the salvation of many Jews after Jesus was resurrected and blessed them with Holy Spirit, as recorded in the first 8 chapters of Acts of the Apostles.

The word "scattered" in verse 52 alludes to the scattered sheep of John 10. Compare it with John 10:12:

- John 10:12: … and the wolf snatcheth them, and <u>scattereth</u> them.
- John 11:52: that he might also gather together into one the children of God that are <u>scattered</u> abroad.

"The nation" in verse 52 is the Jews. Compare verses 48 and 52:

- John 11:48: and <u>the Romans</u> will come and take away both our place and <u>our nation</u>.
- John 11:52: and <u>not for the nation</u> only

The Romans actually did come and took away the temple and the Judaeans, the Jews, but not the diaspora[2]. The religious rulers at Jerusalem didn't regard the diaspora Jews as part of their nation.

The idea of Jesus dying for the nation in verse 51 is an allusion to John 10:11, 15, 17, and 18.

- John 10:11, 15: … the good shepherd layeth down his life for the sheep … and I lay down my life for the sheep … I lay down my life, that I may take it again … No one taketh it away from me, but I lay it down of myself. I have power to lay it down, and I have power to take it again.
- John 11:51-52: … he prophesied that Jesus should die for the nation; and not for the nation only, but that he might also gather together into one the children of God that are scattered abroad.

Verse 52 is an allusion to John 10:16:

> And other sheep I have, which are not of this fold: them also I must bring, and they shall hear my voice; and they shall become one flock, one shepherd.

The first-century reader noticed these allusions.

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2 The diaspora was the Israelites living in foreign countries.

After applying the interpretations of John 11 to the Parable of the Good Shepherd, John 10:11 and 16-17 mean approximately the following:

> Like a good shepherd, I will voluntarily die on behalf the nation of Judaea … . And I will bring the diaspora from the countries where they are scattered in the same way that a shepherd calls his sheep; and they shall become united like one flock with the Judaeans, under one shepherd (me). … I am going to die and be resurrected.

The earliest readers of John thought the diaspora, the dispersed or scattered Jews, were "the other sheep". The idea that the other sheep were the gentiles originates from a later time, and from the influence of Acts of the Apostles.

The Hebrew-speaking Jewish religious leaders were bad shepherds. Webster & Wilkinson describe their contempt for the sheep in the diaspora in their comments on Acts 6:1, when defining the Greek words *Helleniston* and *Hebraious*:

> … *Ελληνιστων*] These were the Jews who lived in foreign countries, and used the Septuagint version of the Scriptures. For this reason they were in low estimation among the native Jews, *Εβραιους*, among whom the knowledge of Greek was in such disrepute, that in the war with Titus it was forbidden to teach it … .

The bad shepherds even despised the majority of the Hebrew-speaking sheep under their control. John 7:48-49 reveals their attitude:

> Hath any of the rulers believed on him, or of the Pharisees? But this multitude that knoweth not the law are accursed.

Jesus Refused to Preach to the Greek Jews and the Samaritans While He Was Alive.

There were only two groups that the Gospel of John says would have to wait to be preached to: the diaspora Greeks and the Samaritans. The Greek-speakers of the dispersion were overwhelmingly Jews, not from the ten tribes.

Some Greek Jews tried to talk to Jesus in John 12.

John 12:20-22 says:

> Now there were certain Greeks among those that went up to worship at the feast: these therefore came to Philip, who was of Bethsaida of Galilee, and asked him, saying, Sir, we would see Jesus. Philip cometh and telleth Andrew: Andrew cometh, and Philip, and they tell Jesus.

His speech in John 12:23-33 was an answer to the question that was asked. It is not unambiguously clear whom the words were spoken to, but I think that they were addressed to Andrew and Philip[3], and meant: "No, they can't see me now. But I will attract them to me after I die." Jesus said in John 12:23-24 and 32-33 (ASV):

> And Jesus answereth them, saying, The hour is come, that the Son of man should be glorified. Verily, verily, I say unto you, Except a grain of wheat fall into the earth and die, it abideth by itself alone; but if it die, it beareth much fruit. … And I, if I be lifted up from the earth, will draw all men unto myself. But this he said, signifying by what manner of death he should die.

John 4 describes Jesus's visit to Samaria. The visit reveals that Jews shunned Samaritans to such an extent that the Samaritan woman was surprised that a Jew would even ask for a drink of water from her "for Jews have no dealings with Samaritans" (John 4:9)[4]. In verse 10 Jesus gives the woman hope of "living water". She believed that she was an Israelite, a descendant of Jacob (verse 12): "Art thou greater than our father Jacob …?" Jesus explains that his "living water" gives "eternal life" (verse 14).

But since "salvation is from the Jews" (John 4:22), these children of Jacob (and of Israel and of God) had to wait to be gathered into one flock till after the diaspora Jews were gathered. Jesus violated a custom by even speaking to the Samaritan woman. But he said that the right place to worship at that time was Jerusalem. Yet a time was coming when true worshipers would not worship at a certain place on earth, but in spirit and truth (John 4:20-24):

> Our fathers worshipped in this mountain; and ye say, that in Jerusalem is the place where men ought to worship. Jesus saith unto her, Woman, believe me, the hour cometh, when neither in this mountain, nor in Jerusalem, shall ye worship the Father. Ye worship that which ye know not: we worship that which we know; for salvation is from the Jews. But the hour cometh, and now is, when the true worshippers shall worship the Father in spirit and truth: for such doth the Father seek to be his worshippers. God is a Spirit: and they that worship him must worship in spirit and truth.

So Jesus did speak to some Samaritans. But even though he indicated that some true worshipers were worshipping with spirit and truth at that time, he wouldn't spend much time with the Samaritans. They had an inferior status. He was sowing, and his disciples would later reap (John 4:34-38). Some Samaritans did indeed believe even at that time that Jesus was the

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3 Some say that Jesus's words were addressed to the Greeks. Jesus did speak a little to the Samaritans, but made them wait to become Christianized, just like he made the Greeks wait.

4 The Jewish religious leaders despised the Samaritans. John 8:48: "The Jews answered and said unto him, Say we not well that thou art a Samaritan, and hast a demon?"

Savior of the world (John 4:39-42). Jesus only stayed with them two days (verse 40). They remained separated from the Christians till being evangelized by Philip, and given the Holy Spirit by John and Peter, as described in Acts 8. As it turned out, according to Acts, the Samaritans were given priority over the gentiles. Maybe this was because they observed the Mosaic Law, or maybe only because they were circumcised and wouldn't create as much of an uproar as the uncircumcised gentiles. Or maybe they really were descended from Jacob, and thus represented the ten tribes.

In the same manner, Jesus refused to see the diaspora Greeks who had gone to the festival to worship (or else spoke only a few words to them) and said in an obscure manner that his agents would preach to them and save them after his death. As I said above, he delayed the conversion of the Samaritans till after his death, saying that he sowed the fields, but his disciples would harvest them. There is no similar story for an uncircumcised gentile in the Gospel of John. This gospel was written before the conversion of the gentiles.

John 1:29 says:

> On the morrow he seeth Jesus coming unto him, and saith, Behold, the Lamb of God, that taketh away the sin of the world!

The Pharisees couldn't imagine that the sin of the world could be taken away. They thought that even Judean common people who didn't know the Law were accursed. And they despised foreigners like the Greek diaspora and the Samaritans even more.

I explained that the other sheep in the Parable of the Good Shepherd were "the children of God who were scattered abroad", the diaspora. They are probably the Greek Jews that Jesus was talking about in chapter 12. The author of John might have also meant to include the Samaritans.

What Can Be Gleaned From the Book, Acts of the Apostles?

Unfortunately, the author of the Gospel of John didn't write a book like Acts of the Apostles to show the fulfillment of Jesus's words. If he had written such a book, he would have left no doubt in our minds how the Parable of the Good Shepherd was fulfilled. He might have had more to say about it than Acts chapters 1-8. Maybe some of the apostles went on missionary trips to preach to the thousands of Greek Jews in Egypt and Syria, in a manner similar to how Paul preached to the gentiles. Where were the Greek gospels written? In Jerusalem, in Samaria, in Alexandria or somewhere else in the Greek diaspora? I get the impression from the Gospel of John that the gathering of the Good Shepherd's sheep into one was going to be an indefinite future period of time when "the true worshippers would worship the Father in spirit and truth" (John 4:20-24). But Luke, even though not trying to explain the parable, seems to have indicated a different historical fulfillment.

Luke wrote Acts long after the period I'm talking about. The greater part of Acts (chapters 9-28) tells about the conversion of Paul and his preaching to the gentiles, and does not pertain to the Parable of the Good Shepherd. Luke might not have known of the Gospel of John. And whether he did or not, he didn't write Acts to explain that gospel.

The Gospel of John is very clear in chapters 10-12 that Jesus was going to unite the diaspora Jews with the Jews of Jerusalem. So I will do my best to match the fulfillment of the prophecy with the history in Acts, at risk of error. I trust Luke, but Luke was not trying to explain John's gospel. And the part of Acts that includes the time of the fulfillment is short, the first part, not the larger part that describes the Christianization of the gentiles.

Jesus told the apostles to remain in Jerusalem, not just in Judaea. Acts 1:4 says:

> … he charged them not to depart from Jerusalem, but to wait for the promise of the Father, which, *said he*, ye heard from me:"

John 10:16-18 predicted in an obscure way that the Good Shepherd would die and then get resurrected before he would gather his sheep. John 12:32-33 likewise obscurely predicts that Jesus would die, get "lifted up from the earth", and then "draw all men unto himself", including the Greeks who had wanted to talk to him. Acts chapter 1 says that Jesus ascended to heaven after dying.

Luke writes something reminiscent of the gathering of his scattered sheep in Acts 2:1-4:

> And when the day of Pentecost was now come, they were all together in one place. And suddenly there came from heaven a sound as of the rushing of a mighty wind, and it filled all the house where they were sitting. And there appeared unto them tongues parting asunder, like as of fire; and it sat upon each one of them. And they were all filled with the Holy Spirit, and began to speak with other tongues, as the Spirit gave them utterance.

The Holy Spirit was "the promise of the Father" according to Luke (Acts 1:4); it was the "Comforter", "the Spirit of truth", that was predicted according to John (John 14:16, 26). The Good Shepherd gave his life, so that he could go to heaven and get the Holy Spirit, which turned out to be the voice [*φωνης*] that his "sheep" in Jerusalem heard.

The long list of nations in Acts 2 shows that the dispersion was not restricted to the Greeks. This is surprising, since the Gospel of John specifically mentions only the Greeks and the Samaritans. On the other hand, the "other sheep" are called "the children of God that are scattered abroad" (ASV) or "the children of God that were dispersed" (Douay) in John 11:52. And exiled Jews who spoke other languages really were "scattered" and "dispersed". In the Gospel of John, maybe Jesus simply didn't comment on the future of Jews who spoke other languages.

They received that "promise of the Father", Holy Spirit, on the day of Pentecost (Acts 2:1-4).

Acts 2:5-6 says:

> Now there were dwelling at Jerusalem Jews, devout men, from every nation under heaven. And when this sound [*φωνης*] was heard, the multitude came together, and were confounded, because that every man heard them speaking in his own language.

The nations who spoke the different languages are listed in verses 9-11. They heard the loud sound of the Holy Spirit coming upon the apostles, or else the resultant miraculous languages, and according to Acts 2:6:

> when this sound [*φωνης*] was heard, the multitude came together, and were confounded, because that every man heard them speaking in his own language.

These events are reminiscent of some statements in John 10. Comparing himself to a shepherd calling his sheep to unite them, Jesus said (John 10:16):

> And other sheep I have, which are not of this fold: them also I must bring, and they shall hear my voice [*φωνης*]: and they shall become one flock, one shepherd.

Acts 2:5 had said that these were "devout men," so they were good sheep. John 10:4 had said that a shepherd's sheep "follow him: for they know his voice [*φωνην*]".

The English translator could have substituted the word "sound" for "voice", which would make it more clear that Acts 2:6 could have been describing the "voice" of the Good Shepherd. The change in the Greek spelling for the word *phones (φωνης)* in one verse [*phonen*, or *φωνην]* is just a change in declension required by Greek grammar. The word is the same.

Young's Literal Translation translates *phonen* as "voice" in John 3:8[5]:

> the Spirit where he willeth doth blow, and his <u>voice</u> [*<u>φωνην]</u>* thou dost hear

Is the hearing of the wind (or else, the hearing of the different languages) really what was meant by the sheep hearing the voice of the shepherd in John 10? And is the gathering together of men of the dispersion on this one occasion, men who already happened to be in Jerusalem, really what was meant by the sheep uniting in one flock, in John 10?

Acts 6:1 speaks of a division between "the Grecian Jews against the Hebrews" (ASV). We might think, based on what Jesus said to the Greeks in John 12 together with Acts 6:1, that the Parable of the Good Shepherd was, strictly speaking, only about uniting the Hebrew-speaking Jews with the Greek-speaking Jews, or else bringing the diaspora back to the land of Israel. But

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5 The word for "spirit" also means "wind". Translations differ. A footnote on the verse in the ASV reads: "Or, *The Spirit breatheth"*. The ASV could have, but didn't, add a footnote to Acts 2:6, showing that "when this sound was heard" could have been translated "when this voice was heard".

Acts 2 specifies that the speakers of many languages were "dwelling there", including Parthians, Medes, Elamites, Mesopotamians, Phrygians, Libyans, and Arabians. Could the dispersed Israelites "dwelling there" be said to be "gathered together" in some sense? Numerous commentaries say that the Greek verb for "dwelling there" (*κατοικουντες*, or *katoikountes*) could possibly have referred to a temporary visit for the festival of Pentecost (Deut. 16:16). So Jerusalem might not have been their permanent residence. But Acts does not say that the voice [*φωνης*] of Jesus called them to Jerusalem. It says that the sound [*φωνης*] of the Holy Spirit (which could be said to be the voice of Jesus) brought them from wherever they were in Jerusalem to the location where the Holy Spirit had made a loud noise and was speaking numerous languages.

Some commentators have said that the Jews from some of the countries were descended from the ten tribes. But "Jews" in Acts 2:5 means "Judaeans", or members of the tribe of Judah. If Luke wrote "Jews" literally, then they were Judaeans by race, or by descent. And we know that they were also Jews by religion, because Acts 2:5 says that they were "devout". Some were living Judaea where they belonged, but others were from "every nation under heaven".

The place of fulfillment of the Parable of the Good Shepherd was — if we are guided by Acts — Jerusalem. And the time of fulfillment was, strictly speaking, between Pentecost and the persecution that caused them to be "dispersed through the countries of Judaea, and Samaria, except the apostles". I say this because Acts emphasizes the unity of the diaspora in Jerusalem, and because this remarkable unity ended after the great persecution. And only then, after the gathering into one fold of the Good Shepherd's sheep of the tribe of Judah, did the Samaritans get an opportunity to be become Christianized.

The unity was so noteworthy that Luke mentioned it in Acts 2:44-47:

> And all that believed were together, and had all things common; and they sold their possessions and goods, and parted them to all, according as any man had need. And day by day, continuing stedfastly with one accord in the temple, and breaking bread at home, they took their food with gladness and singleness of heart, praising God, and having favor with all the people. And the Lord added to them day by day those that were saved.

The unity of the Hebrew-speaking Jerusalemite Christians with the foreign-language speakers from the dispersion is repeatedly described in the early chapters of Acts. There were 5,000 sheep in the flock as of Acts 4:4: "many of them that heard the word believed; and the number of the men came to be about five thousand".

Like a united flock, they were still sharing all their possessions with each other in Acts 4:32-34:

> And the multitude of them that believed were of one heart and soul: and not one *of them* said that aught of the things which he possessed was his own; but they had all things common. … For neither was there among them any that lacked: for as many as were possessors of lands or houses sold them, and brought the prices of the things that were sold, and laid them at the apostles' feet: and distribution was made unto each, according as any one had need.

The supernatural unity was briefly interrupted by the "murmuring of the Grecian Jews against the Hebrews" (Acts 6:1). The problem was immediately fixed.

A great multitude of Hebrew-speaking priests joined the one flock in Acts 6:7:

> And the word of God increased; and the number of the disciples multiplied in Jerusalem exceedingly; and a great company of the priests were obedient to the faith.

Acts 8:1 (Douay) says that the Christians who were persecuted and driven out of Jerusalem "were all dispersed through the countries of Judea, and Samaria, except the apostles". This is surprising, since the Gospel of John indicates that the Pharisees had control of Judaea, not just Jerusalem (John 7:1 and 11:7-8). So Judaea was dangerous in John, but a place of refuge in Acts. Jesus told the apostles in Acts 1:8: "… ye shall be my witnesses both in Jerusalem, and in all Judaea and Samaria, and unto the uttermost part of the earth." Jerusalem was in Judaea; yet Judaea was listed separately from Jerusalem, in series with "Samaria" and "the uttermost part of the earth". This is reminiscent of how the Judaeans are listed in series with far-off countries in Acts 2:9.

To summarize, the Gospel of John says in the Parable of the Good Shepherd that Jesus would die on behalf of his sheep, and that after his resurrection, he would unite his sheep. This gospel says that the Greeks and the Samaritans would have to wait till after Jesus's death to learn more about Jesus. We learn from John 11 that the "other sheep" are the dispersion. But we might wonder whether the Samaritans were included because of the repeated references to them in that gospel. And we might wonder if only the Greek-speaking dispersion was meant, because the Gospel of John was silent about other languages. Luke called the multitude from every nation under heaven "Jews" instead of "Israelites". Acts 2:5 is silent about the other tribes. So the Good Shepherd united Hebrew-speaking Jerusalemite Jewish Christians with devout Jews speaking other languages from everywhere outside of Jerusalem.

Luke, even though not trying to interpret John, and possibly not aware of the parable, wrote a history of remarkable events that must be the fulfillment of the parable under discussion. He gave details of how the resurrected Jesus provided Holy Spirit that enabled the apostles to speak in all the languages of the dispersion, thereby calling together thousands of representatives of the dispersion who were already in Jerusalem. Even though not comparing

Jesus and his followers to a shepherd and his sheep, Luke emphasizes the extraordinary unity of the Jerusalemites with the dispersion. That sounds like it must be the actual historical fulfillment of the parable. But, according to Luke, that supernatural unity only lasted from Pentecost till the persecution in Jerusalem. According to this interpretation, the Judaean sheep were scattered and left the fold. The miraculous gathering into one fold was for a limited time[6]. Otherwise, Acts would have continued to report that Christians elsewhere "were of one heart and soul: and not one *of them* said that aught of the things which he possessed was his own; but they had all things common". The historical reality was that the Samaritans were not called into the one flock during those days in Jerusalem. They were only Christianized immediately thereafter. I wonder what the readers of the Gospel of John thought after reading Acts for the first time.

The Parable of the Good Shepherd Based on Ezekiel 34

The entire parable may be based on Ezekiel 34. Webster & Wilkinson, commenting on John 10:1-2, said:

> … The whole *παροιμια*[7] is so remarkably in accordance with Ezek. 34, that it may well be supposed to be founded upon that chapter, in which the false shepherds, their dishonest and ravenous character (*vv.* 2-4, 8) and the appearance and conduct of the one good shepherd (*v.* 23) are fully described; see also Zech. 11.

It also resembles Jeremiah 23 and Zechariah 11.

The authors of John and of Acts didn't make the Scriptural allusions clear. But it seems clear that the people who heard Jesus would have thought of Ezek. 34, so I will make some comments, even though they aren't as interesting as the ones on Acts. The false shepherds of Israel are responsible for the dispersion of the sheep. Jesus's audience, knowing that Ezek. 34 was about Israelites exiled in other countries, also knowing that most dispersed Israelites had never returned, probably thought that the parable was about a literal return of the exiles to the land of Israel.

Ezekiel 34:1-2 begins:

> And the word of Jehovah came unto me, saying, Son of man, prophesy against the shepherds of Israel, prophesy, and say unto them, even to the shepherds, Thus saith the Lord Jehovah: Woe unto the shepherds of Israel that do feed themselves! should not the shepherds feed the sheep?

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6 How long? Most commentators think that the period from Acts 2:1 till Acts 8:1 was several years. A few think about one year. I think maybe a few weeks or months.

7 Transliterated *paroimia.* Translated "parable" in the ASV in John 10:6.

As in the Parable of the Good Shepherd, the sheep were scattered because of the bad shepherds (Ezek. 34:5):

> And they were scattered, because there was no shepherd; and they became food to all the beasts of the field, and were scattered.

The bad shepherds ate the fat and clothed themselves with the wool and killed the fatlings, but didn't feed the sheep (Ezek. 34:3). So the sheep wandered away and got lost. Ezekiel 34:8 (ASV) says:

> As I live, saith the Lord Jehovah, surely forasmuch as my sheep became a prey, and my sheep became food to all the beasts of the field, because there was no shepherd, neither did my shepherds search for my sheep, but the shepherds fed themselves, and fed not my sheep;

Because the shepherds didn't search for God's mistreated and scattered sheep, God says that he himself is going to gather them. Verse 13 says:

> And I will bring them out from the peoples, and gather them from the countries, and will bring them into their own land; and I will feed them upon the mountains of Israel, by the watercourses, and in all the inhabited places of the country.

Once he has brought the sheep back to the fold, God says that he will appoint a good shepherd, David, over them (verse 23):

> And I will set up one shepherd over them, and he shall feed them, even my servant David; he shall feed them, and he shall be their shepherd.

The wolves in John 10 are the predator-nations of the captivity, that is, if interpreted from Ezekiel 34:5, 8, 25, and 28 (even though self-serving religious leaders could have logically been called wolves, as they were in Acts 20:29-30). The nations that prey on the sheep of Israel are called the beasts of the earth in verse 28:

> And they shall no more be a prey to the nations, neither shall the beasts of the earth devour them; but they shall dwell securely, and none shall make them afraid.

Foreign kings or armies are called beasts in Daniel 7. It's clear that Jesus was ascribing fault to the Jewish religious leaders, maybe specifically the rulers of the Jews, the Sanhedrin.

So I will paraphrase some verses from John 10, as if they have to harmonize with Ezekiel 34 and John 11:

> 8 The Jewish religious leaders, including the chief priests and Pharisees, have been bad shepherd-rulers and have preyed upon the Jews. 11 Like a good

> shepherd-ruler, I will voluntarily die on behalf the nation of Judea [or else, of Israel], so that the whole nation will not perish. 12 The bad religious leaders abandon the Jews when they see dangerous foreign nations coming. Those nations scatter the Jews into a diaspora scattered in foreign countries … 16 And I will bring the dispersed Jews [or else, Israelites] from the countries where they are scattered in the same way that a shepherd calls his sheep; and they shall become united with the nation of Judea, under one shepherd-ruler … 17 I am going to die and be resurrected.

The forefathers of the Jews who were born in the countries listed in Acts 2 had mostly gone to those countries as a result of the captivities. Their descendants who never returned from exile were called the Jewish diaspora or dispersion[8].

The following comments by Matthew Henry, from a superscription on Ezek. 34 and on a footnote on that chapter, seem reasonably compatible with how Jesus might have understood Ezekiel 34:

> CHAP. XXXIV. *The iniquities and calamities of God's Israel, had been largely and pathetically lamented before, in this book. Now, in this chapter, the* shepherds of Israel, *their rulers both in church and state, are called to an account, as having been very much accessory to the sin and ruin of Israel, by their neglecting the duty of their place* … I. The prophet is ordered to "prophesy against the shepherds of Israel" — the princes and magistrates, the priests and Levites, the great Sanhedrim, or council of state, or whoever they were that had the direction of public affairs, in a higher or lower sphere; the kings, especially, for there were 2 of them now captives in Babylon … God has something to *say to the shepherds*, for they are but under-shepherds, accountable to him who is the great *Shepherd of Israel*, Ps. 80:1 … II. … (1.) They did not do their duty to those of the flock that were *distempered*, did not *strengthen* them, or *heal* them, or *bind them* up, *v.* 4. When any of the flock were sick or hurt, worried or wounded, it was all one to them whether they lived or died; they never looked after them. The princes and judges took no care to right those that suffered wrong, or to shelter injured innocency. They took no care of the poor, to see them provided for … The priests took no care to instruct the ignorant, to rectify the mistakes of those that were in error, to warn the unruly, or comfort the feeble-minded. The ministers of state took no care to check the growing distempers of the kingdom, which threatened the vitals of it … (2.) They did not their duty to those that were *dispersed*, that were *driven away* by the enemies that invaded their country, and

8 See 1 Peter 1:1 [διασποραϛ, or *diasporas*] and James 1:1 [*εν τη διασπορα*, or *en te diaspora]* in the ASV, Douay, and some other Bibles.

> were forced to seek for shelter where they could find a place; or that wandered of choice upon “the mountains and hills,” (v. 6.) where they were exposed to the beasts of prey, and became *meat to them*, *v.* 5. Every one is ready to seize a waif and stray. Some went abroad and begged, some went abroad and traded, and thus the country became thin of inhabitants, and was weakened and impoverished, and wanted hands both in the fields of corn and in the fields of battle, both in harvest and in war; “My flock was scattered upon all the face of the earth,” *v.* 6. And they were never inquired after, were never encouraged to return to their own country; “None did search or seek after them.” Nay, “with force and cruelty they ruled them,” which drove more away, and discouraged those that were driven away from all thoughts of returning. *Their* case is bad, who have reason to expect better treatment among strangers than in their own country. It may be meant of those of the flock that went astray from God and their duty; and the priests, that should have taught the good knowledge of the Lord, used no means to convince and reclaim them, so that they became an easy prey to seducers. Thus were “they scattered, because there was no shepherd,” *v.* 5. There were those that called themselves *shepherds*, but really *they were not* … Christ complains that his flock were “as sheep having no shepherd,” when yet the Scribes and Pharisees *sat in Moses' seat,* Matth. 9:36. It is ill with the patient, when his physician is his worst disease; ill with the flock, when the shepherds drive them away, and disperse them, "by ruling them with force."

Jesus's original audience might have recognized the allusion to Ezekiel 34. And some of them probably matched the selfishness of the shepherds in the prophecy with the attitude of the Jewish religious leaders. But none of them would have guessed that Jesus was going to gather the lost sheep to worship in spirit and truth instead of in Jerusalem (John 4:20-24). And none would have thought that the good shepherd in Ezekiel would die and be resurrected before uniting his sheep with a miraculous outpouring of Holy Spirit. The original audience would have thought about the entire Israelite *diaspora*, not just the Judaean *diaspora*. They would have expected a return to the entire land of Israel, not just to Judaea. I am not sure how closely the Parable of the Good Shepherd follows Ezekiel 34. Maybe the earliest readers of the Gospel of John knew.

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